

Special Issue: Implications of COVID-19 on Higher Education

Challenges for Higher Education in Times of COVID-19: How Three Countries Have Responded

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic brings to the fore strengths and weaknesses in many public policies, including higher education. There are at least three separate but related areas where institutions of higher learning have been stressed by COVID-19: financing, issues related to the logistics of learning, and inequality. These problems are especially pronounced in countries that suffer from high levels of inequality, such as Chile. This editorial offers a review of some of these challenges and their implication for long-term education policy, touching on the cases of Chile, Canada, and the United States.

Keywords: *COVID-19; higher education; education policy; Chile; Canada; United States*

Date Submitted: March 8, 2021 | Date Published: June 5, 2021

Recommended Citation

Funk, R. L. (2021). Challenges for higher education in times of COVID-19: How three countries have responded. *Higher Learning Research Communications*, 11, 106–111. <https://doi.org/10.5590/10.18870/hlrc.v11i0.1242>

Introduction

The emergence of a global pandemic brings to the fore strengths and weaknesses in a whole range of public policies, most obviously healthcare. Less apparent, but no less important, are other social conditions such as inadequate housing, leading to large groups living in cramped spaces, and inequality of access to the technology necessary for working from home or distance learning. Around the world, the effects of COVID-19 on higher education are diverse and far-reaching. As it has in other public services, the pandemic raises new challenges and highlights existing problems. Tertiary education is no exception, and governments, fighting the pandemic on multiple fronts, have had to adapt education policies to the new reality.

There are at least three separate but related areas where institutions of higher learning have been stressed since the pandemic began in early 2020: financing, issues related to the logistics of learning, and inequality. These are global issues but are especially pronounced in countries that suffer from high levels of inequality, such as Chile. How does COVID-19 affect higher education in the global south compared to more developed

economies? This paper offers a review of some of these challenges and their implication for long-term education policy, touching on the cases of Chile, Canada, and the United States.

Political and Educational Systems

Chile and the United States both share higher education systems that combine public and private colleges, although in Chile private universities, by law, must be non-profit. On the other hand, the Canadian higher education system is, with few exceptions, essentially a public system. Beyond the clear differences in size, wealth, and demographics, there is another major feature that has impacted how each country has responded to COVID-19 in general and to higher education in particular: While the United States and Canada are both federal, Chile is a unitary state, where most policy, including education, is controlled by the central government. This is hugely important in the country's being able to offer a coordinated response to all aspects of the pandemic, including vaccinations, quarantines, and the needs of higher education. However, as Rozell and Wilcox (2020) illustrated, federalism is one of many political factors that determine the kind of public policy response to the pandemic. The type of federalism, or how much power regional leaders wield, together with other factors such as the extent of welfare coverage, are also relevant (Giraudy et al., 2020).

Financing

One area where federalism impacts a government's ability—or at least efficiency—in responding to the current pandemic is in providing financial support for higher education and for the students enrolled in higher education. The pandemic has affected higher education financing in several ways. The most obvious, perhaps, is how travel restrictions have impacted the ability of students to travel and study abroad. In the United States, the international student market is estimated to be worth some \$45 billion (Bloom, 2020). In the United Kingdom, even local students have been demanding refunds for not having attended classes in person. This is especially true for educational programs requiring laboratory and workshop-related assignments (Brignall, 2021). During the first weeks of the pandemic, many Chilean students went on strike to demand greater flexibility in payments and improved conditions for distance learning (Said, 2020).

Funding structures are also important. For example, in 2017, about one quarter of federal funding for universities went towards research (PEW, 2019). It is unclear how this type of funding might be affected by the inability of many laboratories to continue functioning during the pandemic.

Governments are trying to adjust. In March of 2020, the United States Congress passed the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act), which included considerations for higher education institutions, aimed mostly but not exclusively at Pell Grant recipients. It suspended payments on federal (Department of Education) student loans and stopped collection on defaulted loans. It also established a 0% loan repayment interest rate. The CARES Act also established the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund, which provides additional financial support to students through their educational institutions to include costs of food, housing, childcare, and other education-related expenses (CARES, 2020). The new United States government administration will try to bolster these measures. President Biden has said he is willing to consider up to \$10,000 in loan forgiveness, considerably less than the \$50,000 for which many have advocated. For the moment, the COVID package passed in the first month of the Biden administration increased the funding contained in the CARES Act and provided a further \$22.7 billion for higher education (Norwood, 2020).

Canada has introduced similar programs, doubling the maximum amount available through Canada Student Loans, although, as has been pointed out above, much depends on each province's education ministry (Government of Canada, 2021a). The province of Ontario, for example, gave a reprieve of a few months on loan payments, but the relief expired in October 2020 (Government of Ontario, 2021). Canada also introduced the Canada Emergency Student Benefit, which in 2020 offered CDN 1,250 every four weeks for a maximum of

16 weeks (Government of Canada, 2021b). Still, universities continue to lobby for greater financial support since they anticipate income will continue to be affected by the ongoing pandemic. In 2021, universities in Ontario expect to lose CDN 500 million (Loriggio, 2021).

At the very beginning of the pandemic, it was estimated that the financial impact on Chilean universities would be in the region of CLP 80 billion (USD \$110 million) (Sanhueza, 2020). Chile's Ministry of Education published a document that outlines some strategies in this regard. Among other measures, it announced that government grants would be channeled towards funding needs arising from COVID-19. It also sought to facilitate distance learning through various platforms. For example, the government reached an agreement with Google to make available Google Classrooms (Ministerio de Educación, Gobierno de Chile, 2020).

Logistics

In addition to establishing rules and guidance regarding how to operate safely, governments around the world have offered a series of programs and support for the logistics of higher education in times of COVID-19. Depending on the case and the level of transmission, governments encourage both in-person and distance learning. Logistics for both cases may involve, for example, widespread and regular testing for students and staff, even for asymptomatic cases (U.K. Department for Education, 2021). In countries like the United Kingdom and the United States, where so many students tend to live on campus or away from home, policies for how to handle positive cases are extremely important. Uncontrolled and unsupervised positive cases in residence environments, for example, could be catastrophic.

One logistical area where the Chilean Ministry of Education had to adapt in a major way was the implementation of the yearly national university admission test, usually held in December. This year it was delayed until January and conducted over two days, with flexibility offered for students suffering from COVID-19 (Ministerio de Educación, Gobierno de Chile, 2020). In addition, the Ministry of Education opted to reduce the content that would have been covered in the final year of secondary school, which happened during the pandemic (Ministerio de Educación, Gobierno de Chile, 2021). It is difficult to ascertain what impact this change may have had on the overall results, especially since the test underwent changes to content and last year's test was interrupted by student protests. These changes resulted in improved attendance, and the number of top-scoring students (known as Puntajes Nacionales, or National Point Scorers) more than doubled (Muñoz Vives, 2021).

More generally, the Chilean government has invested a great deal of time and money in training higher education staff and academics for the reality of COVID-19, from training for use of online platforms such as Zoom and Google Suites to offering advice and services to protect mental health (Subsecretaría de Educación Superior, Ministerio de Educación, Gobierno de Chile, 2020a; Ministerio de Salud, Gobierno de Chile, 2020). Similar investment was made in Canada at the provincial level (which is responsible for higher education). The Province of Quebec, for example, dedicated over CDN 100 million for adapting teaching methods, addressing mental health concerns, and providing student financial support (Government of Quebec, 2021).

Inequality

In recent decades, access to higher education has rapidly expanded in Chile, in a way that many developed countries experienced in the 1950s and 60s. In 2015, some 70% of students in Chilean universities were their family's first generation to attend institutions of higher learning (Jarpa-Arriagada & Rodríguez-Garcés, 2017). This expansion has been most prominent among middle and lower sectors; those students enter the system with economic and cultural capital disadvantages (Jarpa-Arriagada & Rodríguez-Garcés, 2017, p. 335). Many students, therefore, may not have adequate infrastructure for distance learning. This may include lack of or out-of-date computers and slow or no internet connectivity. In 2019, Chile's Ministry for Social Development determined that 632 towns and villages across Chile had no internet access (Biblioteca Nacional de Chile,

2020). To this end, universities such as the University of Chile have had to make portable internet chips and modems available. As early as April 2020, some 7,000 tablets had been distributed to students in higher education (Subsecretaría de Educación Superior, Ministerio de Educación, Gobierno de Chile, 2020b). For other students, cramped living conditions meant not only the possibility of ambient noise interfering with learning, but also inadequate lighting, air circulation, temperature, and furnishings. These aspects of higher education are much harder for government or universities to subsidize.

Geography—as the physical expression of social inequality in a socially segregated society—also matters. As early as March of 2020, COVID-19 was still most prevalent among higher-income residents of Santiago; it has been hypothesized that the virus was most likely brought to the country by well-off residents who had returned from summer vacations abroad. At that time, researchers warned that “the population of those engaged in informal work is concentrated in the most vulnerable (areas of Santiago), presenting greater difficulties for quarantine and social isolation. While the virus appears to be concentrated in the high-income area, the first person to die from contagion was a person over 80 years old, living in a low-income commune” (Perucich et al., 2020, para. 1). More recently, as Chile has faced a strong second wave of contagion, despite impressive vaccination rates, lockdown was once again more possible or effective in the more well-off areas of Santiago. Two weeks into the second major lockdown, the six communes that managed to reduce the number of active cases were all found in the wealthier eastern district of the city (Latorre & Rivas, 2021). Such geographic inequality translates into living and studying conditions for students at all levels.

Although these issues may be less common in developed countries, even the United States recognizes that the pandemic has affected the material well-being of students. For example, it has expanded the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program for students enrolled in higher education to ensure that they have access to sufficient and nutritious food (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). Chile has a long-standing nutritional support program for students in need, and this has continued during the pandemic. The government’s Student Assistance Program has delivered electronic cards that allow qualifying university students (lowest three income quintiles) to purchase food via delivery applications (Junta Nacional de Auxilio Escolar y Becas, Ministerio de Educación, 2021).

Conclusion

It should perhaps not be surprising that, despite different political systems and educational structures, the needs and problems faced by higher education globally during the pandemic seem to be similar. The early challenge of reorganizing teaching to a distance model was met in wealthy and less wealthy countries (although Chile is clearly on the higher end of the developing world). Technology has, for the most part, facilitated this shift, although both in the north and south, inequality of wealth and living conditions affect access to adequate technology, a situation that at least part of government spending is destined to address. But inequality and poverty also impact students in less obvious ways, such as the capacity to find adequate spaces for learning, food, and income support for students who may no longer have access to part-time employment. While it might be unfair to criticize governments and higher education systems for not having been better prepared for teaching in a pandemic situation, the problems of poverty and inequality in higher education are ones that pre-existed COVID-19, and the pandemic has only made them more evident and addressing them more urgent.

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